

The Case for Reauthorizing PL 106-393
The Secure Rural Schools and Communities Self Determination Act of 2000

Background

The National Forest System was formed in 1905 from the Forest Reserves, which were established between 1891 and 1905 by presidential proclamation. During that time, 153 million acres of forestlands were set aside in Forest Reserves and removed from future settlement and economic development. This imposed great hardships on those counties that were in and adjacent to these new reserves. In many cases, 65 to 90 percent of the land in a county were sequestered in the new forest reserves, leaving little land for economic development and diminishing the potential tax base to support essential community infrastructure such as roads and schools. There was considerable opposition in the forest counties to establishing these reserves.

In 1908, in response to the mounting opposition to the reserves in the West, Congress passed a bill which created a revenue sharing mechanism to offset for forest counties the effects of removing these lands from economic development. The 1908 Act specified that 25% of all revenues generated from the multiple-use management of our National Forests would be shared with the counties to support public roads and public schools. People in our forest counties refer to this as the "Compact with the People of Rural Counties" which was part of the foundation for establishing our National Forest System.

It was the intent of Congress in establishing our National Forests, that they would be managed in a sustained multiple-use manner in perpetuity, and that they would provide revenues for local counties and the federal treasury in perpetuity as well. And, from 1908 until about 1986, this revenue sharing mechanism worked extremely well. However, from 1986 to the present, we have, for a variety of reasons, reduced our sustained active multiple-use management of the National Forests and the revenues have declined precipitously. Most counties have seen a decline of over 85% in actual revenues generated on our National Forests, largely as a result of the decline in all forms of green and salvage timber harvesting.

This steep decline in revenues led to the formation of the National Forest Counties and Schools Coalition in 1998. The Coalition is an umbrella organization of over 1,100 local, state, regional, and national organizations concerned about the long-term sustained management of our National Forests and the economic and social stability of forest counties and communities. The Coalition includes local and county government, public school districts, road districts, organized labor, business and industry, and forest user groups.

PL 106-393 - A Success Story

In 2000, the Congress passed PL 106-393 to address the needs of the Forest Counties of America and to focus on creating a new cooperative partnership between citizens in forest counties and our federal land management agencies (US Forest Service and BLM) to develop forest health improvement projects on public lands and simultaneously stimulate job development and community economic stability.

PL 106-393 restored the 1908 compact between the people of rural America and the federal government and it has been an enormous success in achieving and even surpassing the goals of Congress.

PL 106-393 has:

- Restored programs for students in rural schools and prevented the closure of numerous isolated rural schools. It has been a primary funding mechanism to provide rural school students with

educational opportunities comparable to suburban and urban students. Over 4,400 rural schools receive PL 106-393 Title I Funds.

- Allowed rural county road districts and county road departments to address the severe maintenance backlog resulting from decimated road budgets from 1986 to 1999. Snow removal has been restored for citizens, tourists, and school buses. Bridges have been upgraded and replaced and culverts that are hazardous to fish passage have been upgraded and replaced. Over 780 rural counties receive Title I funds for roads.
- Over 70 Resource Advisory Committees (RAC's) have been formed, under Title II of PL 106-393. These RAC's cover our largest 150 forest counties. Nationally these 15 person diverse RAC stakeholder committees have studied and approved over 2,500 projects on federal forestlands and adjacent public and private lands. These projects have addressed a wide variety of improvements drastically needed on our National Forests. Projects have included fuels reduction, habitat improvement, watershed restoration, road maintenance and rehabilitation, reforestation, campground and trail improvement, and noxious weed eradication. RAC's invest funds that are approved by Forest County Boards of Commissioners for these purposes under Title II of PL 106-393. Resource Advisory Committees (RAC's) are a new and powerful partnership between county governments and the U.S. Forest Service and BLM. They are rapidly building the capacity for collaborative public land management decision-making in over 150 of our largest forest counties in America and are reducing the gridlock over public land management, community by community. Each year our RAC's are learning to partner more effectively with state, county, and private entities and each year the amount of outside funding leveraged with Title II RAC funding has grown significantly. Today over 30% of RAC project funding comes from outside partners. Clearly, the Resource Advisory Committee mechanism must be extended. It is achieving desired results.
- Title III projects on forest county lands are also authorized by PL 106-393 and many counties have effectively invested in projects and programs under this authorization. For example:
 - Many forest counties have been able to offset the rising cost of search and rescue work on federal lands. With increased recreation pressure on our federal lands, rural law enforcement is being called upon to provide search and rescue support at a rapidly increasing rate. Without PL 106-393 support, most counties could not meet this demand.
 - Conservation easements - a number of counties have used Title III funds to purchase conservation easements to compliment efforts to conserve green spaces through their county general plans.
 - Fire Prevention
A large number of forest counties have invested PL 106-393 Title III funds in developing fire prevention strategies and educating citizens in fire safe actions. Since the passage of the Healthy Forest Restoration Act, over 100 counties have been actively engaged in developing Community Wildfire Protection Plans using Title III funding. These same counties will be investing Title II funds through the RAC process to implement their community wildfire protection plans through HFRA. We believe this nexus between Title II and III of Secure Rural Schools and HFRA is an example of positive synergy and effective government.
 - A number of excellent forest related outdoor education programs have been established with Title III funds.

In Summary

PL 106-393 is a remarkable success story. These funds have restored and sustained essential infrastructures such as county schools and county roads through Title I. Essential forest improvement projects have been completed through Title II projects funded by forest counties, and planned by diverse stakeholder RAC committees. These groups are reducing management gridlock and building collaborative public lands decision-making capacity in counties across America. Finally, essential

services are being supported and developed in forest counties by investing Title III funds. The legacy of PL 106-393 over the last few years is positive and substantial. This law should be extended so it can continue to benefit the forest counties, their schools, and continue to contribute to improving the health of our National Forests.

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